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PETER CARTWRIGHT

## SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF PETER CARTWRIGHT

BY WILLIAM EPLER

When a child I heard so much of the courage and daring of the Rev. Peter Cartwright, I became to have fears of the man. This feeling remained with me, in a modified degree, as I grew older, until one hot Sunday afternoon in early August, 1870, when the mistaken impression was removed, under the following circumstances:

The doctor came to hold a quarterly conference at old Zion Church, near Little Indian, Cass County, Illinois, he being the Presiding Elder of the district. The business of the Conference was attended to on Saturday, as was the custom. On the Sunday following, services were held at 11 o'clock a. m. and in the afternoon also. At both services sermons by the Presiding Elder were expected. The day, as stated above, was hot. The good doctor preached a sermon, at the eleven o'clock hour. Went to my father's (John Epler) for dinner. When the time came to go back to the church for the afternoon service, he remarked to my father, "The weather is so warm, I do not think I should be required to go down to the church to preach another sermon this afternoon. I must return home this evening (18 miles). There will be a good preacher there, he can talk to the people. I shall lie here on the grass, in the shade of one of these trees, until the sun further declines, then return home." I heard this decision and I determined at once to be one of the party to lie under the tree on the grass, as it will be a good chance to hear the doctor talk and learn something of his career from first hands.

Everyone left the premises for the afternoon service, except the doctor, my father and myself. The place of rest chosen was on the bluegrass in the inviting shade of a hard maple. The conversation, as might have been expected, was concerning the early settlement of the county, early times, generally, the deep snow, etc. The doctor was in his 80's, my father 75. I, who was a silent listener, soon began to have a real liking for the old pioneer. I noticed his bland manner,

his kindly expressions and absence of harsh criticism. My childish distrust vanished, felt free to put in a word, occasionally, and did. I remarked to him, "Doctor, in books I have read of experiences you had with Gen. Andrew Jackson at the Hermitage in Tennessee. The story ran about as follows: You had an appointment in the neighborhood of the Hermitage, where you regularly preached. On one occasion, you were preaching, the General for the first time attended service that day, coming in a little late, when a brother, seated behind, twitched the skirt of your coat, exclaiming in a whisper, 'be careful, Gen. Jackson has just stepped in.' You announced, in a voice so that all could hear, 'Who cares for Gen. Jackson, he will go to hell, like any other man, if he does not repent of his sins.' This produced consternation, all thought, at the first opportunity the General would surely cane you, if not worse, but it did not turn out in that way. The first opportunity the General had, he cordially greeted you, took you by the hand, commended your manner of presenting Bible truths, adding, 'if I had ten thousand men like you, I could drive the British off this continent,' and invited you to the Hermitage for dinner." The doctor replied: "There is no truth in the story, as found in print. It is true, I had a preaching place in the neighborhood of the Hermitage. The General, occasionally, came to our meetings, and I had been invited to the Hermitage, we were always on friendly terms." "Doctor, here is another. Tradition, says Mike Fink, was the terror and fistic autocrat in an early day from the falls of the Ohio to New Orleans, among flatboat men. His custom was, before forming new acquaintances with strangers, to challenge them for a combat, a real combat, no pretentious affair. His object was to ascertain how worthy they would be as companions. On first meeting you, the usual challenge followed. You promptly accepted, sailed into him, giving a good thrashing. Ever after you were good friends." At this he laughed. I think his reply was, he never saw Mr. Fink, but had often heard of him. My father who had been on the rivers as flatboat man, corroborated that part of the story, as to Mike's personality and to his domineering tendencies.

The doctor listened to these book stories, in the most patient good humor, convincing me further of his mild disposition. But don't think for a moment, the doctor was wholly made up of mildness and amiability, as the following incident

would seem to contradict: In early August, 1860, the writer attended a camp meeting at Black Oak Grove, near Ebenezer Church, three or four miles northwest from Jacksonville, on the Sabbath day. Dr. Cartwright preached the morning sermon, to be followed in the afternoon by the Rev. Peter Akers. Dr. Akers was a profound and deeply learned man. When he was to preach in the afternoon, it was necessary for him to begin early, so he could finish before a late hour.

The horn to assemble the people was promptly blown. As this camp meeting was near Jacksonville, it was to be expected many of the town's people would be present, especially of the younger class, and so it was. At the blowing of the horn many of these young people gathered around the outside row of seats in standing positions, quiet and respectful enough, excepting many of the young gentlemen did not remove their hats, and not a few were smoking cigars, never thinking they were violating camp meeting propriety. Dr. Cartwright arose, looked around. He began his remarks by stating the want of reverence of many when attending Divine service, especially at camp meetings. With a sweep of his arm, and an eye of no mild type, he exclaimed: "I mean those young people, standing around with hats on, smoking cigars; if *their hearts were as soft as their heads*, such irreverence and such impudent conduct would be foreign to their sense of propriety." Needless to say, in an instant every hat was doffed and every cigar under foot, and soon the standing circle had vanished.

This camp meeting incident was ten years previous to the hot Sunday afternoon under the maple tree. The ten intervening years may have had a mellowing effect, doubtless had. The facts are, Peter Cartwright was equal to any emergency during the active period of his life, and he knew how to deal with it. He resisted wrong wherever he found it, sometimes with a mailed fist (so tradition says), sometimes with a soft glove, as the case might have been. The following bits of early history were inherited from my parents: It about 1825, as they relate, the Sangamo country, out in Illinois, was attracting much attention in Clark county, Indiana. The praise of that country was without limit by those who had "spied out the land," its beautiful groves, its expansive fertile prairies, its wild fruits, in fact every feature and charm required to make a new country attractive, belonged to it. Here let me

add, I am a native of the Sangamo country, born and raised in it, and can, without prejudice, indorse every praise it received.

My parents related this. About the year 1826 the annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was held in Charlestown, Clark Co., Ind. The Conference District was vast in extent, embracing, as it did, Indiana, Illinois, parts of Kentucky and Ohio. Peter Cartwright represented the Sangamo country. After the business of the conference was transacted, he was requested by the people to address them. Taking for his theme, "The Sangamo Country," he obligingly consented. In his address he gave an account of its advantages and its disadvantages, its landscape beauties, its fertile prairies, its wild animals and wild fruits, all in all, a truthful and charming description of the country. Among other things, he said: "Brick houses do not grow on trees in that country, but there were two nice large brick houses within a mile of his log cabin home." Two brothers, by the name of Broadwell, came into the country, made a settlement, laid out a town site, and built the two houses. They doubtless came from Kentucky, as they named their embryo city "Claysville."

One of these houses was intended for a public inn, two stories high, double galleries on north and south sides. For years it was the wonder of the Sangamo country. This pioneer inn is still standing, though in a neglected and ruined condition, galleries long since gone, and decay everywhere visible. The writer remembers, when a boy, in the 40's and early 50's, this inn was headquarters for the Ohio and Pennsylvania cattle buyers. These cattle buyers were there most of each winter, buying up the fatted cattle of the country, of which there were many, driving them, the next spring and summer, to the far eastern markets, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston. The other brick house was a nice dwelling, was so considered then, and would be now. It was removed some years ago by the B. & O. Railroad Company, being in the way when the company was making betterments along its line. "Claysville" is, or was, located one mile east of the beautiful little city of Pleasant Plains.

This address of Rev. Cartwright resulted in a number of good families removing from Clark Co., Indiana, to the Sangamo country. All came just before the deep snow, or one year afterwards. Among the number may be found the names of

Crum, Beggs, Epler, Hopkins, Robinson of Sugar Grove, Robinson of Hebron, Morgan Co., Garner and the Cosner brothers, perhaps others, all settling west of and within a few miles of the Cartwright home. All became permanent and successful farmers, all raised large and respectable families. Their coming aided greatly in bringing prosperity to this sparsely settled land, and that prosperity continues, for where can be found a better citizenship of more prosperous communities than can be found within few hours' horseback ride from the old Cartwright home?

Of all the people in this Cartwright hegira, the writer knows of but one now living, that one is my cousin, Mrs. Sarah Cunningham, of Cass County, now nearly 96 years old, born, Hopkins.

Before proceeding further, I will state Dr. Cartwright erected for himself, before or soon after the deep snow, a very comfortable two story brick house, located about one mile northwest of Pleasant Plains, in which he passed the evening of his life.

The activities of the Doctor in the interest of the old fashioned camp meetings were ceaseless and effective. He early saw their value to the pioneer settlers and to the country's development. First settlements were "few and far between," making the church worship of a later day quite impossible. At these camp meetings the pioneers assembled, bringing their households, with camp equipage, "for man and beast," usually for a week's stay, frequently longer, coming long distances, frequently as much as a day's travel.

No argument is necessary to establish the helpfulness of these meetings during pioneer days. Not only were ethical questions considered, but business of an everyday character, the various phases of agriculture, as to the best methods, all being new and untried, doubtless shared equal attention (on the side of course), each profiting by experiences of others.

"Black Oak Grove," at Ebenezer, about four miles northwest of Jacksonville, was one of the prominent camp grounds, in the Doctor's district and, it may be said, a favorite of the Reverend Akers. "The Robinson Camp Ground," at Hebron, Morgan Co., about seven miles northeast from Jacksonville, was another prominent place. "The Garner Camp Ground," located on Little Panther Creek, Cass County, about six miles

east of Virginia, was a camp in early days. Still another, and the most modern, the "Holmes Camp Ground," about four miles northeast from Virginia, in Cass County. The Holmes succeeded the Garner. A Cumberland Presbyterian church camp meeting place, widely known, maintained for many years, was located on Rock Creek, Sangamon County. Besides the camp meetings above mentioned, the Baptist association conducted meetings, of much the same character in various parts of the country. One was annually held at the head of Indian Creek, near the home of the Rev. William Crow. Rev. William Crow was a very early settler, coming in the 20's, before the deep snow, a man possessing many sterling qualities and highly regarded.

We had not thought, at the beginning of these recollections of elaborating on camp meetings, but we found, to write of the work of Peter Cartwright, leaving camp meetings out would be like writing up the war record of George Washington leaving out "Valley Forge and the Crossing of the Delaware." So, some account of them had to be written.

It may not be considered amiss, to mention in these recollections the peaceful, though sensational death of his aged consort who survived him. She was attending an experience meeting in the nearby Bethel Church. All old fashioned Methodists know what an experience meeting is, or was; almost obsolete now. She gave her religious experience in a very touching manner, concluding by saying, "I am just waiting for the Chariot," took her seat, leaning her head forward on the back of the seat in front. Rev. Harding Wallace was in charge of the meeting. When the congregation was dismissed, he noticed she did not move, going up to her, he was unable to get response. She was dead. He announced to the waiting people, "the Chariot has come."

The camp meetings served their purpose well and have long since gone into disuse, being no longer necessary, and indications too plainly point to the fact, that with them are going the country churches, the auto, the village church, the pealing organ are closing their doors. Is this changing condition for the best?

The fame of Peter Cartwright is assured, as the years pass he is becoming more widely known. His unselfish work in planting the *Cross* in so many distant wilds, is receiving



more and more appreciation. Story and song will magnify his work, as the muses delight in flattering the great, or nearly great at least. He will be long remembered in the Sangamo country.

Of the old John Epler estate, the land part has been kept in the highest state of efficiency, but the old house, the house built in 1837-38, the first built with saw mill lumber in that section, is abandoned to bats and decay. The brood has gone, its spacious apartments, once filled with joy and love, are being used for the shelter and keep of agricultural implements. Tenants and employed help, not particularly interested in its upkeep, occupied it for years. Its imposing outside chimneys have disappeared. It stands as solidly on its foundation as when first erected.

The yard in which it is located is overgrown by weeds, but that maple tree still stands, though with its fading foliage, testifying to the surrounding neglect.

During all the years since, the writer seldom passed that tree without calling to mind what was done and said in its generous shade during that hot Sunday afternoon in August, 1870.